

**Taboos**  
**Structure and Rebellion**

**Lynn Holden**

**2001**

**Monograph Series No. 41**

*THE INSTITUTE FOR CULTURAL RESEARCH*

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Monograph Series No. 41

This version prepared for free download 2006.

The original hard copy edition:

ISSN 0306 1906 – ISBN 0 904674 33 9 – Published 2001

may be purchased from the address given above, or on the ICR website,  
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## **Note**

This monograph derives from *Taboos: The tradition of the forbidden*, a lecture given to the Institute for Cultural Research in October 2000.

# Taboos

## Structure and Rebellion

Though we may think of taboos as mere vestiges of a distant age, cast off in our more hedonistic, liberal times, they continue to exert their power, playing a crucial role in every aspect of our lives. Indeed, today, just as in the past, the transgression of social or cultural codes can lead to exclusion, isolation, or even death.

Taboos, of course, evolve and change: most western societies are more relaxed about sexual transgressions than they were, say, in the 19th century, and in an age of increasing secularisation, blasphemy is not such a damnable offence. On the other hand, we are more sensitive to the feelings of minorities or those with infirmities: the disabled are no longer designated ‘cripples’ and it is considered distasteful to refer pejoratively to those of a different race. Sartorial taboos remain strong – the City may no longer be replete with men in bowler hats, but the suit is as pervasive as ever, as is the tie (at least for men. Women are still relatively scarce in the world of finance, with or without a tie). Table manners may not be as formal as they once were, but it is still considered impolite to eat with an animal appetite, gobbling the meal up ‘like a pig’. On the other hand, Westerners have not yet adopted chopsticks and continue, as the Chinese put it when they abandoned knives for reasons of decorum, ‘to eat with swords’.

But what actually is a taboo and how does it differ in essence from a law or a superstition? In a western democracy it is not so difficult to distinguish a codified law from a taboo: the violation of a law can result in a fine or imprisonment while social misdemeanours, such as bad behaviour at the dinner table, would not normally lead to arrest. Taboos are also more flexible than laws: they vary according to the formality of the setting or the group that one is in. But some taboos, such as incest between close relatives, are also laws.

In a preliterate society written laws do not exist and the distinction between a law and a taboo is less clear. The term *taboo* was first introduced into European languages by Captain James Cook and is mentioned in 1777 in a journal charting his third voyage around the world as the captain of HMS ‘Resolution’.

Describing the indigenous people of Atui, one of the Sandwich group of islands, he writes:

The *taboo* also prevails in Atooi, in its full extent, and seemingly with much more rigour than even at Tongataboo. For the people here always asked, with great eagerness and signs of fear to offend, whether any particular thing, which they desired to see, or we were willing to show, was taboo, or, as they pronounced the word, *tafoo*? The *maia*, *raa*, or forbidden articles of the Society Islands, though, doubtless, the same thing, did not seem to be so strictly observed by them, except with respect to the dead, about whom we thought them more superstitious than any of the others were (*Steiner: 22*).

Cook realised that the term taboo was common throughout Polynesia and could be applied to many different things, both animate and inanimate, living and dead. It could mean something, or someone, that was set apart, or consecrated for a special use or purpose: in Tahiti, the victim of human sacrifice was *Tataa-taboo*, a consecrated man. The term also applied to restrictions placed upon certain members of the society, often women: in Tahiti females were forbidden to eat in the company of men and the Polynesian *Mories*, places of worship and sacrifice, could never be entered by women. In Tonga, *tabu* or *tapu*, indicated all things that must not be touched. Cook also mentioned the ‘mysterious significance’ of the notion of tabu and the ‘mixture of religion’ in a ceremony that had been designated taboo.

The basic meaning in both Melanesian and Polynesian languages of taboo or tapu is ‘off limits’. Something is off limits, of course, depending upon one's perspective. What is off limits for one person may be mandatory for another. Besides, things may only be temporarily ‘off limits’ – foods that are restricted in times of scarcity may become ‘noa’, or permissible, when the circumstances improve. Unfortunately Cook interpreted the term as though it were a noun and initiated the problems that later ethnographers had in interpreting the term.

For instance, in 1937 the anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote an article entitled ‘Tabu’ for *The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (502-505). In it she summarises the essential elements of Polynesian taboo:

- a) any prohibitions enforced automatically, that is, the punishment followed inevitably without external mediation; b) or the edicts of

chiefs and priests, which are supported either by the superior mana (magical power) of these individuals or by the temporal or spiritual forces which they have under their control; c) prohibitions against theft or trespass for which the sanctions are specific magic formulae; d) religious prohibitions which are referred in native theology to the decree of some deity or spirit; e) any prohibitions which carry no penalties beyond the anxiety and embarrassment arising from a breach of strongly entrenched custom (*Steiner: 143*).

Mead argues that only the first clause, namely that a transgression incurs automatic penalty without outside intervention, defines taboo in the strict sense of the word. This treats taboo as though it were a kind of superstition and is far too narrow in its scope. If we include all the clauses she mentions, including the prohibitions that carry no penalties beyond social embarrassment, we come close to our understanding of the term.

The next question to ask is: 'What are the social or religious reasons for taboos. What function do they serve?' Of course, there are many different taboos and it is unwise to assume they all have the same function. But one major function is social control, to maintain the status quo and validate the authority of the ruling classes.

This can be seen clearly in the Hindu caste system in India where taboos rendered members of a certain group, social outcasts or 'untouchables' because their traditional occupations of leather tanning and street cleaning were considered unclean, making them ritually impure and capable of polluting others. The social structure that was later to become ossified in the caste system already existed during the Vedic period (from 1200 B.C.E.) and consisted of four classes, or *varnas*: Brahmans (the priests), Ksatriyas (soldiers), Vaisyas (farmers) and Sudras (artisans and labourers). The Brahmans integrated the caste system into Hindu religious law and claimed divine justification for their decision. In the *Rig Veda* (*Rig Veda* 10.90) the gods create the world by dismembering the cosmic giant, Purusa (primal man), who becomes the victim in a Vedic sacrifice: 'His mouth became the Brahman, The Warrior was the product of his arms, his thighs were the Artisan, from his feet the Servant was born'. Thus each varna has its place in the social hierarchy determined by the creation myth. The *Manu Smriti*, or *Law of Manu* (a legendary figure, variously dated from 600 B.C.E. to 300 C.E.) systematised the social and religious laws and further

specified the duties of each of the four varnas. But there remained a fifth group consisting of those who had no varna designation, whose position was not sanctified by the scriptures, and who were, quite literally, the outcasts.

The Indian caste system is characterised by extreme rigidity; membership is hereditary, marriage is restricted to members of the same caste, and the choice of occupation and social relationships is carefully circumscribed. It is validated by the Hindu idea of karma, a belief that all people on earth are reincarnated and the caste into which someone is born is determined by conduct in previous existences. To be born an Untouchable is therefore a punishment for previous transgressions, but as Hindus place all living things in a hierarchy according to the degree of purity, the violation of certain laws of purity can cause contagion and result in a person of a higher caste becoming an outcast during his life. The *Laws of Manu* refers to pollution from contact with an Untouchable as well as from birth, death and menstruation. A law states:

If a man has touched a 'Notorious by Day' Untouchable, a menstruating woman, anyone who has fallen (from his caste), a woman who has just given birth, a corpse, or anyone who has touched any of these objects, he can be cleaned by a bath (*Manu* 5.85).

The rules for avoiding pollution are intricate. Generally cooked food is more liable to pass on pollution than raw food, so members of any caste may handle uncooked food. Meat, and especially beef, is forbidden to all but the lower castes. Certain substances such as faeces and left-over food are particularly polluting and can only be removed by an Untouchable. While the ground does not transmit contagion, the straw that covers it does. Professor Edward Harper, who studied Havik Brahmin pollution rules, observed:

A Brahmin should not be in the same part of his cattle shed as his Untouchable servant, for fear that they may both step on places connected through overlapping straws on the floor. Even though a Havik and an Untouchable simultaneously bathe in the village pond, the Havik is able to maintain a state of *Madi* (purity) because the water goes to the ground, and the ground does not transmit impurity (*Harper*. 1964: 173).

Clearly religion has been used in India to suppress certain groups. The nationalist leader, Mohandas K. Gandhi opposed the Manu Smirti and called Untouchables *Harijan*, (children of God, although

now they designate themselves *Dalits*, or ‘oppressed’), and helped to politicise them. The Constitution of 1950 outlawed untouchability, although the caste system has not yet disappeared.

Hinduism is not the only religious system to employ myths as a means of validating the status quo. Just as the *Manu Smriti* states that under no circumstances must anyone harm a Brahmin, so Judaism accorded its priests a special status and no one but a priest was allowed to offer sacrifices or burn incense on the altar. Divine punishment was visited upon those who disobeyed; even the powerful King Uzziah was afflicted with leprosy after he attempted to burn incense in the Temple (2 *Chronicles* 26: 16-23).

Social control is also a motive for the restrictions placed upon certain cultural forms: art, literature or music. The Greek philosopher, Plato (c. 427-347 B.C.E.) was repelled by the corruption and violence that he saw in Athenian political life. This prompted him to write *The Republic*, a work in which he applied philosophy to political affairs and, in the form of dialogues, put forward his proposals for an ideal state. While discussing education, he set out his proscriptions on certain types of music; the wrong type of music, he believed, could have a pernicious effect and undermine the very fabric of society.

The Greeks distinguished different types of musical style which they linked to specific moods. Plato initially rejected the modes known as the Mixed Lydian and the Extreme Lydian, used for dirges and laments, and the Ionian and certain Lydian modes which tended to accompany drinking, relaxation and idleness. These styles were considered unsuitable for the education of the young; only that music which encouraged bravery and fortitude on the one hand and moderation and tolerance on the other were allowed, exemplified by the Dorian and Phrygian modes. In more recent times, the Dutch composer, Louis Andriessen, wrote *De Staat* (*The Republic*) as a contribution to the place of music in politics. He expressed regret that Plato was wrong in thinking that musical innovation posed a danger to the State: if only, he mused, it had such power.

Nonetheless, totalitarian regimes have continued to censor art and music. In Germany during the Third Reich innovative art schools such as the Bauhaus were closed and all art that did not conform to a pseudo-classical Nazi ideal was banned and displayed in an exhibition of so-called ‘degenerate art’ (entartete Kunst).

Much contemporary 'atonal' music suffered the same fate.

Political opportunism lay behind the manipulation of other taboos, namely those on cannibalism. The popular term 'cannibal' is a derivation, via Spanish, of *Caribs*, the name of a native race which occupied the southern islands of the West Indies at the time of their discovery by the Spanish at the end of the fifteenth century. Christopher Columbus confused Caribs with *cani-ba* and the 'canine' great Khan of China, and coined the term *cannibal* (White: 63). He is responsible for the proliferation of the rumour that Caribs were cannibals: although he had personally witnessed no flesh-eating he mentions man-eating Caribs in a letter that was printed and disseminated throughout Europe (Arens. 1980: 44-46). Since the time of Columbus, travellers and, later, anthropologists, have reported the existence of cannibals in almost every part of the globe. Christopher Columbus never actually visited the island of the Caribs but based his evidence on the neighbouring Arawaks (Mason: 54). However he saw the possibility of using the Caribs as slaves to work in mines and on plantations. Official Spanish royal policy prohibited the enslavement of the islanders; only those of the Cannibal race were exempt, a clause that naturally led to the identification of ever more Cannibals in hitherto uncharted territory (Arens. 1980: 44-54). The depiction of foreigners as uncultured man-eaters helped palliate the guilt of the colonisers who could claim they were bringing civilisation to savages.

The anthropologist, William Arens, in his book, *The Man-Eating Myth*, tells how he had his suspicions about the prevalence of cannibalism aroused when, on a field trip to Tanzania in 1968, he himself was suspected of 'blood-sucking'. Europeans were believed to kill and drain the blood of Tanzanians; this was taken by fire engine to a local hospital to be converted into pills which were necessary if white people were to survive in Africa. The question arose: if Africans had constructed such erroneous stories about Europeans, could western tales of African cannibalism be equally spurious? On inspection, there turned out to be few first-hand accounts of cannibalism and those that did exist were often implausible. William Arens was not the first European to be accused of devouring human flesh. After Captain Cook was killed in Hawaii, Lieutenant James King, an officer on Cook's ship, questioned the Hawaiians as to whether they had eaten part of the Captain's body after he was killed. They were horrified. Not

partaking of human flesh, they could only come to the logical conclusion: that Europeans did (Obeyesekere, p. 138). It has sometimes been difficult for ethnocentric Europeans to understand that they, too, may be the foreigners.

Unfortunately at the start of the 21st century foreigners are still treated with suspicion – in Britain asylum-seekers are maligned by the popular press and reviled as ‘beggars’, ‘rapists’ and ‘cheats’. They are accused of ‘contaminating’ British society, an accusation levelled at minority groups throughout history. In the Middle Ages witches and Jews were deemed cannibals, charged with the murder of Christian children to obtain blood for their rites – certainly these beliefs, still extant in German folklore, helped fuel the propaganda against Jews during the Third Reich.

Women, also, have traditionally been subject to a plethora of taboos circumscribing their movements and restricting their dress. During menstruation they were deemed particularly polluting in many societies, forbidden to cook, for fear they ‘polluted’ the fire, or draw water, for fear they contaminated the water. Often it was deemed necessary for women to live apart from the rest of society, in designated ‘menstrual huts’, for the duration of their menses and sexual intercourse was forbidden. Menstrual taboos were strong in numerous traditional societies and are still evident in Hindu thought and orthodox Judaism. In recent years, arguments have been advanced, by anthropologists and others, that many benefits resulted from the menstrual taboos, and Chris Knight (1991) has even argued that the prohibition on sex during this period was inaugurated by the women themselves – a kind of ‘sex strike’ – as a means to control the menfolk. Initially, Knight speculates, a group of women denied their men conjugal relations unless they provided them with meat. This was integrated into the menstrual and lunar cycles. Synchronising their menstrual patterns, all the women bled during the dark phase of the moon and stayed at this time, and during the period of the waxing moon, with their kinship group. The men were denied access: sex with a menstruating woman became taboo. During the waxing moon, the males hunted, secure in the knowledge that their women could remain in the base camp, unmolested by other men – the women's own relatives being subject to the blood ban. At full moon, the hunters would return to camp with the meat; unable to eat it raw (again forbidden by the blood signal), they passed it to the women, who cooked it and, now

ovulating, conferred their sexual favours. Other anthropologists have argued that the enforced seclusion of women during menstruation, rather than isolating them, allowed a great solidarity to develop among them and that they were freed, for a period, from their conjugal duties.

Whether or not the time of menstruation was traditionally a period of trial or respite, one taboo visited upon women, namely the taboo against women achieving sexual pleasure, had no peripheral benefits. To ensure that women did not enjoy sex, many societies removed the clitoris in a clitoridectomy. The excision of the clitoris is well documented. Nici Nelson, who conducted field research among the Kikuyu of Mathare Valley, Kenya, offers a motivation for the operation:

Medical doctors and Kikuyu women to whom I talked agreed that circumcision ... would limit women's sexual pleasure since the most sensitive tissues of the female genital organs, the clitoris and the labia minora, are excised. Old women interviewed during a return visit in 1984 confirmed this. They said that girls were circumcised to limit their sex drive and to keep them under control ... sex was for procreation only rather than for pleasure (*Nelson: 221*).

The need for a controlled family life seems to have been an important consideration for the psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud is not unaware of the power of the clitoris:

The leading erotogenic zone in female children is located at the clitoris, and is thus homologous to the masculine genital zone of the glans penis. All my experience concerning masturbation in little girls has related to the clitoris and not to the regions of the external genitalia ... I am even doubtful whether a female child can be led by the influence of seduction to anything other than clitoridal masturbation (*Freud: 142*).

However, Freud postulates that at puberty a girl experiences a repression of her libido, which principally affects her clitoridal sexuality. Instead of the clitoris, the vagina becomes her leading erotogenic zone. In other words, as the writer Thomas Laqueur amusingly puts it, the erotic zone of woman migrates, 'Like a Bahktiari tribesman in search of fresh pastures' (Laqueur: 92). This is useful, of course, if she is to enjoy conjugal relations with her husband but there is no medical evidence that this is the case.

In fact, long before Freud's research, medical evidence had revealed an abundance of sensitive nerve endings in the clitoris with a corresponding paucity in the vagina itself, and the later findings of William Masters and Virginia Johnson confirm this, showing that all female orgasms originate in the clitoris (Masters and Johnson, 1966). As with so many of Freud's theories, a repression of innate desires is deemed necessary for the development of the individual and society. The child must counter its infantile oral, anal and Œdipal urges if it is to avoid adult neuroses. (Curiously, Freud, influenced by current theories of evolution, thought that an analogy could be drawn between the development of an individual and that of a society, which evolved from a preliterate to a technological stage. He explored this theme in a series of essays entitled *Totem and Taboo*; however few today would accept his highly speculative views on the evolution of society). In the case of the vagina, this organ may be relatively insensitive but vaginal intercourse is essential for procreation and for the continuation of the species.

So far I have been discussing the implementation of taboos as a means of social control. But the anthropologist Mary Douglas has radically altered our understanding of taboos, arguing that they help us to classify and order our experience. In *Purity and Danger* she examines the taboos surrounding that which is considered dirty and polluting, and the dangers of impurity from contact with people, objects or food considered unclean. Paying particular attention to Hindu prescriptions on ritual purity and the dietary laws of *Leviticus*, she concludes that things are often regarded as polluting, not because they are innately unclean, but because they are in the wrong place or because they defy classification. Both our contemporary concern with hygiene and the ritual imposition of taboos are symptomatic of a need for order, a desire to make the world conform to an abstract idea we have of it. Without clear lines of demarcation, without strict boundaries, it is feared the world will descend into chaos.

Douglas begins by showing how fluid our ideas on dirt really are. Though inhabitants of the industrialised world maintain that cleaning is a purely hygienic act, designed to kill germs and thereby reduce the risk of disease, it was only in the nineteenth century that the bacterial transmission of disease was discovered, and the obsession with cleanliness is much earlier than this. Many a visitor

to the Netherlands of the seventeenth century has expressed astonishment at the almost pathological attack on dirt by the citizens. Moreover, while a Havik Brahmin in India must observe intricate rules to avoid ritual pollution, one of the techniques for purification, a daily bath, could also be considered hygienic. Modern hygiene would appear to share important characteristics with ritual purifications and undermine the assertion that: ‘... we kill germs, they ward off spirits’ (Douglas. [1966]1984: 32). There is also a question as to what constitutes dirt. Mary Douglas follows Lord Chesterfield's definition of dirt as ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas [1966]1984: 35); shoes are dirty when placed on the table, cooking utensils are dirty when not in the kitchen, similarly the hair in the bath or the nail clippings. She says:

Dirt then is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity (Douglas [1966]1984: 35)

One ‘more obviously symbolic’ system of purity that she considers in detail is the dietary code of the Jews derived from the biblical texts of *Deuteronomy* and *Leviticus*. She dismisses hygienic explanations for the food taboos – such as the famous prohibition on the eating of pork being due to the danger of trichinosis – and suggests instead that it is those animals, or categories of animals, which are in some way anomalies, that are considered unclean. For instance, *Leviticus* decrees that, ‘anything in the water which has not fins and scales is unclean’ (xi, 10-12). A fish is defined as a scaly creature that swims through water propelled by its fins. Anything else is a ‘counterfeit’ fish and must not be eaten, hence the Jewish taboo on shellfish and eels. Pigs are also anomalies because although they have cloven hooves, they do not chew the cud, so they do not fit into the class containing oxen, sheep, goats and antelopes. They are therefore forbidden according to the laws of *Deuteronomy* (xvi, 8). Things which avoid categorisation, like matter out of place, disturb our sense of order, they are dangerous, polluting, taboo (Douglas. [1966]1984: 55-56).

Similarly taboo are the orifices of the body, the body's boundaries, because they are the places of transition between the

internal body and the outer world. Through the openings pass food and drink and out of them are expelled saliva, mucus, urine, faeces, and, at times, blood and milk. Together with fingernail and hair clippings, the excreta are both of the body and outside the body, they transgress boundaries and are therefore dangerous. But the physical body, Douglas asserts, has another dimension. It is also a model of human society: 'We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society' (Douglas. [1966]1984: 115). The dangers of breaching the body's borders reflect the dangers (and powers) of transgressing social and moral norms. This means that the fear of pollution is essentially a moral fear, a fear of moral deviance.

Mary Douglas also argues that societies with more rigid social categories manifest a greater anxiety about pollution and bodily control. Among Hindus, the Brahmins have elaborate sanctions to protect the caste purity of their women.

In *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, written in 1970, Mary Douglas develops the analogy, begun in *Purity and Danger*, between the human body and the social system. She argues that different systems of bodily symbols reflect different social patterns and that there is a direct correlation between physical control of the bodily processes and the exertion of social control:

According to the rule of distance from physiological origin (or the purity rule) the more the social situation exerts pressure on those involved in it, the more the social demand for conformity tends to be expressed by a demand for physical control. Bodily processes are more ignored and more firmly set outside the social discourse, the more the latter is important. A natural way of investing a social occasion with dignity is to hide organic processes (*Douglas. [1970]1978:12*).

This means that in a society marked by subordination of the individual to authority there will be severe restrictions on behaviour and dress, the formal and ritual element will be strong and there will be many taboos. The correspondence is as valid for Western social and religious life as it is for primal societies: in the organised Roman Catholic Church ritual dominates, fasting is encouraged (during Lent, before receiving the sacrament, and with abstention from meat required on Fridays) and sins, like taboo violations,

incur penalties and must be formally cleansed. Among the Protestants, by contrast, external symbols are less important, and religion is internalised.

Mary Douglas has been criticised, for reductionism among other things, but her vision of taboo as a kind of frontier guard has been pervasive in the field of anthropology. Edmund Leach also sees taboo as a means of creating discrete categories, whether the purpose is to distinguish 'self' from 'other', farm from field, field from wilderness, edible from inedible, eligible from incestuous. Where there is a danger of the categories becoming confused, the intermediate forms are banned or rendered sacred.

In the same way, language, which, as Leach points out, provides names which allow classification, can also provide tabooed words to inhibit 'the recognition of those parts of the continuum which separate the things' (Leach. 1964: 35). For example, in 'Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse' Edmund Leach explores the relationship between animals that must not be eaten, humans that must not be married and words that must not be spoken. Although he restricts his investigation to animal categories within English culture and among the Kachins of north-eastern Burma, he assumes that his conclusions should apply to many, or indeed all, other cultures. Leach interprets language and naming as a process in an individual's early development as the child learns to identify himself as a distinct entity, separating self from other, and creating discrete categories to sub-divide this 'other', which, together with 'self' had previously formed a continuum within his consciousness. Taboos occur whenever there is a danger of the categories becoming confused; their function is to demarcate the boundaries. He claims that:

Taboo serves to separate the SELF from the world, and then the world itself is divided into zones of social distance corresponding here to the words farm, field and remote (*Leach: 53*).

It follows that animals (and by extension all types of food) may either not be eaten, or be subject to taboos, if they could cause a confusion in the taxonomy by being too close to 'self' or by otherwise blurring distinctions. Animals that live in the house, for instance, are too close for comfort and are therefore tabooed, a feature that is often stressed through the use of a verbal term that is

either obscene or abusive. It is an insult to call someone a ‘bitch’ (female dog) or accuse them of being ‘catty’. Farmyard animals may be eaten but still live close to the house and are therefore commonly subject to restrictions and may be given derogatory appellations. A prime example is the pig which lives in very close proximity to humans; kept in the backyard pigsty and eating leftovers from the household, it has given rise to such human insults as ‘swine’ and ‘boar’.

Certainly there is a case to be made for the danger of borders and frontiers, and the things that cause confusion by blurring categories. In folklore, ambiguity and periods of transition – twilight, midnight, midsummer, May Day Eve and Halloween (turning points of the year in the Celtic calendar) – are all hazardous.

Cross-roads, too, are places of danger; haunted by spirits, demons, ghosts and gods, they cannot be crossed with impunity. Almost every society in the world has at some time treated them with apprehension, as repositories of all that is polluted or all that is magical, and requiring special rituals if they are to be traversed safely. Greek and Roman writers identified the convergence of paths with Hekate, a goddess who had to be supplicated by means of rituals and meals, or ‘suppers’, if she was to keep the uncanny ghosts of the cross-roads at bay and allow the traveller safe passage. The suppers were taken to the *hekataia* – shrines of Hekate situated at cross-roads – at the time of the new moon. If her desires were thwarted and she was denied homage, she could turn vengeful and summon up the wrathful spirits to do her bidding.

The Greek historian, Theophrastus (4th-3rd century B.C.E.), wrote that a superstitious man will anoint stones at cross-roads to appease the ghosts thought to gather there. A Chinese Buddhist text from the sixth century, the *Cheng-fa nien-ch'u chung*, includes under the thirty-six subspecies of hungry ghosts, those that stay at cross-roads. The Aztecs believed that the spirits of women who had died in childbirth, the Ciuapipiltin, descended at the cross-roads at intervals of fifty-two days. They were greatly feared; under their spell, a person's mouth became twisted and filled with foam, the face contorted and the feet numb and misshapen (Baquedano: 190). In European folklore, witches haunted the intersections, a belief that may derive from the association of Hekate with witchcraft. In Wales and Germany witches danced with the devil on May Day Eve (Puhvel: 168).

Besides being a magnet for ghouls, cross-roads have also served as a dumping-ground for things that society sees as polluted or tabooed. In ancient Greece the polluted remains of household purification rituals were taken to junctions. The pollution of the city caused by parricides was also expelled at the cross-roads. Plato mentions how the body of a parricide, after execution, must be taken to a cross-roads outside the city and stoned by all the officials, to expel the dangerous blood-guilt, before being cast out beyond the boundary of the state (*Lg.* 873b-c. In Johnston: 222). This is not so different from the European tradition of burying the bodies of homicides or suicides (once a heinous offence carrying the death penalty) at cross-roads. Disposal of suicides at intersections has even been reported among the Baganda of Central Africa. Fearful of the evil ghosts of these suicides, the Baganda burned the corpses on waste land or at cross-roads together with the tree used for the hanging or the house in which the person had killed himself (Puhvel: 177 n.58).

Important transitions in the life of an individual, whether birth, puberty, initiation, marriage or death are also dangerous and subject to many taboos. In the case of death, the period of danger generally extends from the time a person dies until either the flesh is deemed to have rotted or the putrefaction is rendered inert – through mummification for instance. During the period of mourning, close relatives are commonly restricted in their movements, dress and social lives and the widow or widower may be forbidden to remarry. Many cultures believe that the soul hovers around the body until the flesh has decayed and is a source of danger for the survivors. But there is also a social dimension: when a man dies, society loses in him much more than a unit; its very faith in itself is threatened. This explains why the death of a ruler or someone of high status is so much more traumatic than the death of a child who has yet to be invested with a social role. It takes time for a society to recover from the crisis of losing an important member; gradually, ‘society’ must reclaim what it has invested in the deceased and graft it onto a new member (Hertz: 77 ff). To accommodate this process, typical mortuary rites are characterised by two distinct rituals: rites of separation, the purpose of which, as the Mossi of Burkina Faso proclaim, somewhat paradoxically, is to ‘kill the dead’ by which they mean to destroy what remains alive in a dead person by sundering the emotional bonds that link him to the community, and

rites of integration and the cessation of mourning when the soul is deemed to have been incorporated into the world of the ancestors and the mourners are reintegrated into society. The roles once occupied by the deceased are reallocated and order is re-established. The period of transition then, is steeped in taboos.

Initiation rituals in many traditional societies similarly involve a transitional, or 'liminal' period marked by a suspension of ordinary secular life. The ceremonies often involve the neophyte being separated from secular society, bound to a rule of silence, fasting, and wearing distinctive clothing; maybe fur, feathers and masks, that represent feral ferocity.

But this period, that lies 'betwixt and between' the regular secular life, though subject to many taboos, can be a time free from conventional cultural restraints. This means that myths told during the liminal period, to the initiand in a preliterate society, are full of tabooed acts such as murder, cannibalism, adultery or incest, all stressing transgressions of the moral code. The basic idea is that the borders are dangerous, but by crossing the border, energies can be harnessed, weaknesses overcome. Victor Turner, an anthropologist who has studied this transitional, liminal period in some detail, speaks of the harnessing of vital, regenerative forces. The participant temporarily transcends not only his own social persona, but also temporal laws, and rites of reversal are common. At the same time, the sacred mysteries of the tribe may be revealed: marvels and sacred objects.

Carnivals can have a similarly liberating function, characterised by orgiastic, amoral behaviour, transvestism and status reversal. From the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century, the carnival preceding Lent was one of the major festivals of Catholic Europe. It was a time of liberation from repressive ecclesiastical, feudal and political restraints, from the denial of the flesh (lovmaking was forbidden during Lent), a time of parody, political and religious satire. The violation of religious taboos was originally enjoyed by the clergy themselves: monks wrote parodies of learned treatises and composed liturgies such as 'The Liturgy of the Drunkards' and 'The Liturgy of the Gamblers' (Baktin: 13). Max Gluckman, in his analysis of the taboo violations enacted during the Swasi *incwala*, or first fruits, ceremony, and the 'little ceremony' of the women which was part of the Zulu *Nonkubulwana* festival, emphasised the cathartic function of such occasions, which allowed resentments to

be aired about the king (in the incwala) and the male population (in the Nonkubulwana ceremonies) (Gluckman: 121, 192).

Mary Douglas herself, though emphasising the need for clear lines of demarcation, has recognised the power inherent in the breaching of borders. She had already noticed that among the Lele, of Kasai in the Congo, the pangolin, a scaly, tree-climbing ant-eater, though clearly seen as an anomaly by the Lele and transcending their system of classifications, was auspicious and revered (Douglas, [1975] 1979: 249-275).

The transgression of taboos is also a characteristic of the Aghori ascetics of Benares in India. The Aghori deliberately flouts Hinduism's strict laws on purity, living in cemeteries and claiming to drink dog's urine, to eat excrement and consume the flesh of corpses. Jonathan Parry, who studied the sect, is convinced that foraging among the forbidden contributes significantly to the ascetic's powers:

By his various observances the Aghori acquires *siddhis*, or supernatural powers, which give him mastery over the phenomenal world and the ability to read thoughts. If he is sufficiently accomplished he can cure the sick, raise the dead and control malevolent ghosts. All this, of course, is exactly what one might predict from the Aghori's dealings with corpses and bodily emissions, for – as Douglas (1966) points out – that which is anomalous and marginal is not only the focus of pollution and danger, but also the source of extraordinary power (*Parry: 92*).

In this case the excrement may be powerful because of its marginal position in relation to the body, but the ascetic is also trying to transcend all categories, to reach a state, both primordial and divine, in which the pure and the polluted, the divine and the human, are one.

Another person who sees a power in the transgressing of taboos is the French writer George Bataille. His novels, such as *The Story of the Eye*, published in 1928, include scenes of masturbation, fellatio, cunnilingus, orgies, urination, coprophilia, sacrilege, suicide, insanity, theft and murder. The philosophy underlying his work is most fully exposed in his essays, in particular, *Eroticism: death and sensuality*. In it he discusses the Marquis de Sade's concept of the 'sovereign' man, Pomeroy and Martin Kinsey's reports on human sexuality, Sigmund Freud, eroticism, incest,

prostitution, war, murder, sacrifice, death and religion. He is concerned to find the origins of taboo, religious ecstasy and the erotic impulse. Like Freud, Bataille believes that the tabooed object evokes both desire and repulsion. To satisfy a desire, it is necessary to overcome an initial anguish and break the taboo. The greater the initial anguish, the more satisfying the transgression. Exploring the relationship between fear and desire, eroticism and death, he shows how violence underlies not just sexual urges but also religious experience. Sacrifice has a pivotal role in religious experience and Christianity itself is founded on the notion of redemption through Christ's sacrifice on the Cross.

At this point, it may appear that taboos serve to control a society, or certain sections of a society, to structure it through a system of hierarchies and differentiation, to separate one community from another and, on a psychological level, to separate the self from others and the adult citizen from the oral, anal and Œdipal obsessions of childhood. Those who dare to break the rules or to transgress the boundaries, may achieve considerable power; on the other hand they may be killed or incarcerated for their 'crimes'. But is this the whole picture, or could there be other reasons for the numerous controls that a community, ecclesiastical body or state imposes on its members? Certainly there is much evidence to support the view that prohibitions serve to separate and classify things. Within Hinduism and Islam, the right hand is used for those things considered 'clean' while the left hand is used for 'unclean' things such as cleansing the lower orifices of the body. The body itself is often divided horizontally, with the upper realm as the home of the intellect, while the baser lower body is the region of base, carnal desires. On a vertical plane, the right hand is propitious and the left hand 'sinister' or inauspicious. Table manners, or the lack of them, differentiate man from beast. Mary Douglas amended her writing on Jewish dietary laws to state that Jews continue to disdain pigs in order to distinguish themselves from their pork-eating Christian neighbours and Muslims may also avoid swine to separate themselves from the surrounding Hindus or Christians. A similar logic underlies the fear of mirrors: they duplicate the self, creating confusion, just as twins cause perplexity – possibly the reason why they were sometimes exposed at birth.

However, there are many taboos that cannot be accounted for in this way. For example, although the prohibition on incest may have

originally been a means of separating kin from strangers, it is probably a mixture of the recognition of the deleterious genetic effects of inbreeding and the social and psychological advantages of exogamy that guarantees its survival. It is also true that food taboos are not merely a means of separating cultural groups from one another. Certain cultures may have allergies to particular edible products – milk taboos may have arisen because the indigenous population lacks the enzyme, lactase, which is needed to digest lactose, or milk sugar. Various animals, fish and fowl, normally permitted, have been banned in times of famine so that the food stocks may be preserved (similar to the rationing in wartime Britain or the quotas on cod fishing in the North Sea). Other animals may be more valuable alive than dead: horses and oxen were traditionally used to pull ploughs and carts while in India cows may be more useful for their milk and dung than for their meat.

So that although taboos may serve to structure and order our lives, to define our identities and regulate our aesthetics, or to restrict our behaviour so we have no choice but to rebel, purely pragmatic motives may underlie their most exotic manifestations.

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